

Prison Writing / Écrits de prisonnières

This component of the issue showcases the personal writing of four federally-incarcerated women in Canada, highlighting their personal experiences of prison life.

Cette section met en valeur l'écriture personnelle de quatre femmes incarcérées au Canada, en soulignant leurs expériences personnelles de la vie carcérale.

Untitled *Ghostwriter*

Please note that the editors have altered certain identifying markers to protect the identity of this author.

My name is untitled due to the repercussions I'll suffer for writing up this piece as I still have a possible 3 ½ years left to serve. I'm a thirty-something year old, fair Metis woman currently incarcerated in Grand Valley's Institution for Women out in Kitchener, Ontario. This is my 4th penitentiary I've been in during the last 5 years of my sentence. I've had a lot of struggles inside due to my looks. I'm very white looking however I'm native and I'm quite attractive and small framed so the first penn was not a good fit for me. I was a minority. However, I stood my ground and got a name for myself which caused me more challenges and I landed myself in Maximum Security for basically keeping my mouth shut and minding my own business. During my time in Max, I started to change drastically. The environment I was in quickly turned me into a paranoid explosive monster. I then developed a long assault file and it followed me everywhere I went.

To make a long story short, I ended up here at GVI's Max unit. This is sort of my last resort. I've calmed down inside immensely and grew tired of constantly trying to fight back the system. I'm so depleted now and I'm sick with a physically debilitating disease so my "war days" are done.

On a positive note, I haven't been more motivated to get out and continue with my college and university courses. I keep myself busy here by constantly cleaning and going to school. I've been waiting to start a program working with an elder for the past six months now. Sad to say, I'm currently sitting in segregation for absolutely nothing.

You are probably aware of Ashley Smith's homicide that took place here in a cell next door to me. Well there's another inmate here in the Max unit that's been attacking other inmates on camera and yet she doesn't spend one day in Seg for it. Now, this inmate tried to do the same to me but my door was locked already, otherwise, I would have knocked the crap out of her. It was in front of guards and I was the one hauled to segregation. Now this other inmate always threatens to self-harm herself if she gets locked up for her violence. And when she's got a noose around her neck, the officers can not intervene until a Correctional Manager comes to give them direction. Now that is how they stood and watched Ashley die. So, instead of having another inmate make them

look bad by killing herself, they let her beat, threaten, and terrorize anyone she pleases. Now, I'm not telling on this inmate because she does all her violence right in front of the guards and on Camera so I have no problem exposing the corruption happening over here. Seven women have been moved around in the past month because of this one inmate who's manipulating the system and making a mockery out of Ashley Smith's death.

I am at my limit here and if released from Seg, I will take actions into my own hands. Once again, becoming the monster. I've read the CSC mission statement that says their mission is to turn us into rehabilitated members of society. But I think the real mission statement should go something like "Our mission is to destroy the inmate by breaking them down hence then destroying themselves." I thought I had seen it all but I am living in a death camp and it is not the inmates that scare me.

Yours truly,
Ghostwriter

Solitary
Renee Acoby

Renee Acoby is currently serving an intermediate sentence and has been imprisoned for 14 years, to-date. She is representing "those who lost or tool their lives for us."

Many people have asked me what it was like to live in solitary confinement for years on end under the infamous "management Protocol" that CSC designed for unruly federal females. You wonder what right you have to feel angry about your confinement because it was your own actions/reactions that led to your conditions. So, you solder up and tell yourself to deal with it...until you find yourself in a tangled web of carceral politics and loopholes that rendered indefinite solitary justifiable. You submit the customary grievances and rebuttal at every thirty day segregation review, inwardly questioning if you're closet-case masochistic. Experience dictates that Regional and national levels in CSC will only regurgitate prior findings at institutional hearings, which in turn lead to frustration, anger and the millionth self-proclamation for abandoning the internal grievance system forever. Of course, you never do give up on submitting grievances because, ha ha, maybe someone will eventually listen.

Then you have those renegade days where you wake up feistier than the notorious Black Widow on a geriatric ward. Ten squares of toilet paper? Fuck you. One book for four hours? Fuck you, I have my imagination. So it goes. You push back to reclaim your so-called dignity, know it's one word with a dictionary definition, especially on the rare days you opt for a nude Mexican stand-off. Ironical how you used to attribute weakness to the heads and bug cases that used to wild out for human contact, only to find yourself on the same trip, minus the lovely baby doll attire.

Your mood fluctuates. Although some staff acknowledge that instability in mood is common for long-term degradation, most are quick to opine that mood swings are indicative of a major incident. You try to avoid the intake of endless CSC reports because the general consensus is at odds with what you and your loved ones know to be bona fide about yourself. You are categorized as a number and compared to inanimate/volatile objects, i.e., “handle her as though you are carrying a can of gasoline in one hand and a lighter in the other.” The asshole aspect of you wonders if the clowns are making a double-entendre about your brief juvenile gig as a pyromaniac.

Your body bounces back and forth between healthy and unhealthy, with a dash of grey pallor to highlight your chiseled cheekbones. Your friend is quick to tell you that in medieval era; political prisoners were very gaunt and pale, likening these sickly characteristics to noble suffering?! Only a dear friend could romanticize such ugliness, and you smile at the loyalty. You spend so much time pacing your cell that you begin to feel a tingling sensation that could signal restless leg syndrome or perhaps it are simply psychosomatic. Even though you know you’re too slender to take on a fast, you do it anyway, why??? Because you can.

Spirituality is a swinging pendulum in solitary, especially when you’re on the red road. Medicines, drums and other cultural entitlements become privileges or behavior modification instruments. At times, you question the existence of God simply because you’re still breathing. You wonder if redemption will come in the form of some Dante’s Inferno inspired hell. And even if you did gain access to Heaven, what if I got so angry about my mistreatment in Hell that I fuck up and get tossed back for another round of fire and brimstone? You find yourself agreeing to see the chaplain, simply to toss out these questions and gauge their level of confusion and faith.

Your mind feels like a Molotov cocktail was thrown into it. Sometimes it could be the scent of a shampoo that triggers an old memory, good or bad and sometimes both. You have tunnel vision some days, with every smile you see hiding an agenda and every tear lurks a crocodile. Anger and unbridled hostility permeate every fiber of your being like a virus...

It stays in your system longer than clarity. The proverbial goblin on one shoulder and the voice of reason on the other is a constant battlefield; traversing the minefield between “why” and “why not” becomes almost analogous to defective neurons that can’t seem to fire. You joke about the smoke detector concealing a pinhead camera in your cell and tend to get overly-sensitive when the screws remove the toilet paper from the smoke detector during cell search. Everything is magnified, yet all of the solutions are so simplistic. Classic Zimbardo-ism.

You reflect on the validity of being compartmentalized as manipulative, violent, and threatening and generally as a bad seed by CSC, yet the System that claims to have zero tolerance for such unsavory traits is the first to adopt them when it suits their purpose. When you witness them use OC spray on women with ligatures around their neck over and over, your mind begins to question your logic and values. Somewhere in the back of your mind, you remember a poignant phrase you read in a Holocaust Survivor

memoir: “we speak out against torture not to complain, rather to make sure the people never forget what happened.” You know you’ll continue to speak out, no matter what the cost, because every inch of you believes that someone would do the same for you.

You tend to over-analyze your conversations with people and become slightly annoyed when some people pontificate how similar they were to you, but have since changed. Unsolicited advice pertaining to the battle against an “entity” like CSC is like molten lava being injected into your marrow. You feel no affinity with such despondent individuals because you and at least a million other people don’t believe corrupt systems ever win. When your exterior radiates how adversity is overcome, you are met with resistance. It’s almost as if by refusing to be a victim, you are rendered incorrigible. It is not related to rationalization, minimizing or reaction-formation. And while you don’t feel any compelling need to reiterate this to the System, you do point out that Canada is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely: “WHEREAS IT IS ESSENTIAL, IF MAN IS NOT TO BE COMPELLED TO HAVE RECOURSE, AS A LAST RESORT TO REBELLION AGAINST TYRANNY AND OPPRESSION, THAT HUMAN RIGHTS SHOULD BE PROTECTED BY THE RULE OF LAW.”

When you are not intellectualizing your conditions of confinement, you rely on your television for socialization. Mind-numbing, scripted reality shows is far more appealing than the mundane queries you encounter from the undesirables that can’t function in solitary without constant attention. Yeah, all you cons know who I’m talking about...you’ve all had your fair share of vent-whores on the range.

You become very OCD about your surroundings, noticing when (not if) your books are askew and not color-coded from the daily cell search. It becomes a perverse game between you and the guards (TO SEIZE, OR NOT TO SEIZE), and you cut your losses with a grievance or two. You are one of the lucky ones that are denied access to appliances of any kind, so in a way you are relieved of the burden of trying to iron your socks and floss-thin undergarments. Yes, the OCD can get that bad when you have little to no control over the minuscule details of life in solitary.

Since there have been no longitudinal studies conducted on the long-term effects of being in solitary for years on end (none that I’m aware of, but if so, holler at me), I can only describe what it feels like. When I was told in May 2011 that the Management Protocol was no longer an option, my first inclination was to hide my reaction from Management. This was a way of survival for me while I was in segregation, and I found it very hard to shake.

But when I got back to my cell, I broke down in tears. I couldn’t believe that after close to seven years of being held on the Protocol, the end was in sight. But that’s another story for another time. I’m still alive, and that’s all that matters.

Untitled
Anonymous

My first inclination is to introduce myself by my FPS number; but my indignation prevents me from demoralizing myself to digits. Consider this a feminine spin-off to the alpha-males about how club-fed is just a conservative-laced media hype...much like the hype on statistic & crime the conservatives push.

As a proud, Black, gay woman, I find imprisonment at Edmonton Institution for Women barbaric, degrading, and yes, inhumane. There is no type of support for Black women here - we are not recognized as "visible minorities with distinct needs." We are the punch line to double entendres, i.e., "do you really need to ask why your cell light needs to be turned on?"

We are the elephant in the room when the Ethnocultural policy is dusted off...we are the whispered fun in dysfunctional and the malevolent "n" word when someone decides we are too loud to live with. We are the dirt that sullies the white informant that receives witch-hazel from the Management for the bruised eye that has an uncanny resemblance to sparkled eye shadow.

I live with Attention Deficit Disorder and Bi-Polar Disorder. This combination of deficit meets chemical disorder is crippling at times. When Management converse with me, they lean on my ADD & Bipolar as though it's a comfort blanket - when I am in solitary confinement, they use it as ammo and behavior modification. It is almost as though being a visible minority is equated, or expected, to be in conjunction with some type of deficient. Weed out the undesirables and weak, the non-pure...the regime of the White Supremacists; only now, slavery is the regime in Carceral, unwritten politics.

I never expected imprisonment to be easy. No, I've been willing to do my penance. What I didn't anticipate was the thinly-veiled racism, the homophobia, and the bizarre mind-games that come with certain uniforms who play the race card long before you. I have my flaws and deficiencies - you're dame right I do. But the color of my skin is not one of them, no matter how hard they try and convince me otherwise...

Untitled
Bella

My name is Bella and I'm a 31 year old mother of a nine year old boy. I'm currently on my 6th year out of a 10 ½ year sentence for armed robbery. I'm an activist at heart and I love studying. I can't wait to get back into society and put forth in action all of my great ideas and abilities. I can't wait to be free and to find a nice beautiful wife to start a family with.

P.W's feel comfortable around me to make racial slurs about Natives assuming that I'm one of them but it enrages me like this one time when I was waiting by the door on the couch on the South range of the max unit early in the morning for the Elder to come

smudge the unit (I was one of the Elders helpers for the Max) and they were doing a big institutional smudge and I was so honored to do my part so I was watching the first Sisterhood inmate to arrive and she got patted down and I watched her explain what she was here for to the officers that were there and they had no idea and made faces at each other like they were weirded out. So the inmate left into the spirituality room or on the east range while she waited for the Elder to show and I witnessed the male officer put his hand to his mouth and mimic that 'old Indian whooowhoowhoo!' sound and then the female officer quickly did it back to him and giggled. I yelled out the door and said "I saw that!" but they did nothing and later on, the officer came and ridiculed me and said "I don't appreciate you calling me a racist". And so put it on him, he said I saw nothing. I could have filed a major complaint but in the end I am the Indian and the inmate and no one will ever believe me even though there was two cameras rolling on him. Yeah...he can easily say he was yawning right?

The warden wants me to claim my native status here. Yeah ok then. All the guards will hate me even more and where do I fit in with the inmates??? That's why I like to do it one on one with the Elder or when I am in my cell when no one knows what I'm doing. Fuck I'm more neechi than most of these bitches in here that call me white. And it fuckin' makes me sick! That I can't join in and learn the drum with my sisters cause their too busy hatin' on me and then there's these PW's that make me feel uncomfortable when I do mention that I am Native. I almost feel that I instantly go on their shit list. Sometimes I just don't bother to mention it in EIFW because so many people assume I'm white anyway and it gets me out of the radar. It seems like anytime I have a meltdown or do something they immediately think something is wrong with me mentally cause they can't see a white girl having the parts – oh noooo- she must be crazy. Well that I am. But not 'that' crazy.

The guards treat me different. I'm in the hole right now for some serious shit and to top that I assaulted this female guard twice this month during movement and she still looks in my window at me with a squinted up bunny nose and smiles like I 'm a baby or something and it pisses me off. I'm sure she doesn't do that to the tanned skinned woman next to me (just sayin'). I know I get treated different and chicks see it and it pisses them off but don't you see if piss me off too. I hate being in this skin that's hated so much but I'll stand up for it like the warrior that's running deep in my blood.

The PW's are nice to me yes and I'm not gonna' go out of my way to be a total bitch to them unless they have it coming but I almost resent it sometimes when they're nice to me because other inmates see that and put me on a category level under them as if I'm doin' something shady by sayin' hello back or small chit chat. "I can't help the skin I 'm in." Now if I suddenly I just told them to buzz off then they'd expect that I'm hostile or depressed or some stupid shit cause it's not normal for a white skin to just shut the fuck up and do their time. Like earlier today, I just wanted a quiet night and this friendly PW just came by my window twice and asked if I was sick once and the second time if I was ok? I totally appreciate it all but at the same time that favouritism right there singles me out and I fuckin' can't stand it. Hey, that PW is the only one that's been cool shit on

this whole management I'm on this month and I don't mean to diss her, I'm just making a point, an example of one situation where I'm always singled out. Yeah I get attention more but I'm good, I don't need it. Plus, they don't know what they're doing anyways; it's always the wrong kind. Don't you guards see the attention you're giving me is bringing bad attention from my fellow people? I want to be with my people. I feel so alone sometimes. No matter how violent I am to staff, you still come talk to me like I'm some sweet little princess. It makes me look bad, like I'm doing something. I don't like it. ...wait a minute...I'm lying a bit...I love it some days cause I'll use it to my advantage when I'm being an evil little asshole and I want to use you to get something but I'm so sick of the system now that you takin' all you can from me that I don't want any of your favors anymore. I want my recognition back. My heritage. Of who I am. Who am I?